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Brains Requested

By

Lola Lariscy

The dead owned the city. There was a time that Jackson would have said that and meant the emotionally dead, or the morally dead. Now he just meant the dead dead. Everyone. He watched the dead lumber below from his cafe on the hill; sitting on the patio; drinking stale coffee. He found it funny that they never ran into each other. Some base instincts survived. Yet if they got a hand stuck in a fence, they didn't have enough sense to rotate it so it wouldn't get hinged. They were dumbasses, but in great numbers they were intimidating dumbasses. He hadn't been down from his perch in a year.

It had been three years since the dead took over, since all the living ceased living. Jackson hadn't fought much. He would see the people on the street below being slaughtered. He had what he needed: a generator, some canned food, a garden. The zombies never looked up. They were in the valley, and he was way up on a hill. The only way up was a steep dirt road. That's why the name of his cafe was Up at the Top of the Road. Utter to the locals, who were now dead, and didn't look up.

In the three intervening years he'd noticed the dead evolving. They weren't as dumb as he once thought. They still drove, though not well. They had trouble filling gas tanks. Most cars he saw still had the gas pump attached. They gave up on the pre-pay pumps. He suspected they could no longer read or follow instructions.

Once a day he'd see a bus rollicking by, rocking from all the crazed movement inside. He'd hear their raucous laughter coming through the shattered windows. He'd see thin forms inside: forms without hair, without the outline of clothing. The buses usually turned toward the beach. The dead had excursions. That freaked him out a little. A few weeks before he'd sworn he'd seen a clean reddish-colored head attached to a clean female body enter the bus with the other dead. He had brought his binoculars to his eyes. The clean redhead had looked up and he'd seen a clean face. He'd decided it must have been a freshly

dead person who could still sense human eyes on her. He had gone back to his pretend newspaper.

I should go down there sometime soon, he thought. He needed fuel for his generator. He needed a new generator. He needed razors, shaving cream. He wished he had Havarti cheese, black forest ham, fresh coffee, cream...

He would worry about going down there another day. That day he just wanted to sit on his porch and watch the zombies. The day had a different idea.

He had a surprise when he went to open the door. It was his practice to look outside before opening the door. You know – zombies and all—just a customary glance. He never expected to find anything, so looking became a formality. Jackson was never one for puns, but his careless "formality" almost led to him becoming a casualty.

He remembered that when there were people to talk to, he quite often made bad puns. He smiled to himself.

On this day, he looked between the slits of wood on the door and found he was staring at three pairs of eyes. Two pairs below his eye level, one slightly above. He jumped back and fell against one of his small cafe tables.

He was about to meet the first living humans he'd seen in three years. And one had on a red Indian-style headdress. Great, the first humans he'd met in three years and

they were off-the-bench crazy. Just what he needed.

He served stale coffee to his guests. They didn't seem to mind. They discussed zombie intelligence and why they could get the buses to run on time, but living humans never could. The younger, smaller of the two guys did most of the talking.

"Zombies are smart. Well, smarter than you'd think. They ride the bus every day to the beach. They laugh loudly and act like they're talking to each other, though I don't hear any actual words. Mainly just grunts. Back when there were living pedestrians, the zombie driver would run over them. They'd laugh at that. Sometimes they'd run over zombies. They'd laugh at that too. They're kinda the un-living embodiment of those dumb comedies from the 90's".

He grinned at his own observation. Jackson was almost annoyed with him, but then he thought he probably agreed. This young guy wasn't his type. His name was Paolo, Jackson thought. Jackson hadn't had to remember a name in so long, he'd forgotten how. It was an Italian name—he remembered that. He'd had Italian, but this kid was a bit young for him. Paolo was with the young, pale ginger-haired girl who sat beside him. She was quiet, but she was listening intently. Jackson suddenly realized she was the girl he saw get on the bus.

"You! You rode the bus! You got on the bus with the

zombies, didn't you?" *Jill? Jenny?* He couldn't remember.

"Yeah! I rode the bus." She seemed really excited that he recognized her. Jackson understood —when you're alone enough, you get excited over any human connection. "We realized a few months ago that the zombies had absolutely no interest in us. We could stand beside them and they wouldn't look at us. They either didn't realize we were there or didn't care. We started walking up to them individually at first; then we'd join their crowds. It was my idea to get on the bus." She looked over at Paolo. "Paolo was ready to kill me himself when I told him what I'd done. '*But Jaynie, you could have been killed. Some of them may not be tame*'…whatever. Well, he was right. I was fine then, but we found out later that some of the fresher dead—a year or less—still crave flesh. And they've learned to be fast. They all started slow, but as the food dried up, they learned to compete. Some just gave up but a few got more vicious. So we still have to be careful."

Jackson took a moment to process all this, then found himself distracted by the red headdress. The tall guy hadn't said anything. He wasn't even looking at any of them. He was looking down at the table. His name was James, Jackson remembered that. He couldn't tell what ethnicity James was. He thought maybe mixed, but mixed what, he didn't know. He had beautiful cappuccino-colored skin; short, straight black hair.

Native American? Hawaiian? Jackson couldn’t be sure. Jackson was short, stocky, with dingy scruffy blond hair. Jackson had no cultural heritage, unless growing up in a trailer park was a cultural heritage.

Of course there was the social strangeness of the guy. Jackson wouldn’t call it awkwardness —James seemed absolutely in control of himself and his interactions. He seemed like he just didn't want to talk much. There was an aloofness to him. He didn't seem to have an investment in the world around him. Maybe that was caused by the crisis. Or maybe it just helped him survive the crisis.

Jackson decided that tact and discretion belonged to three years ago. “So...” He looked in the direction of James, but not at James. “So...James...what's your deal? How did you meet up with Jaynie and Paolo?” He glanced at James, and then wandered his gaze over to the two he figured would actually answer.

“James has been wonderful,” Paolo answered. “He saved us. Without his help, I think we would have died a long time ago, or been one of the wandering dead. He was an engineer for the city. He knows all about how the city flows, how it's connected. He can build anything. He goes out for spare parts all the time and he can build anything we need out of whatever scrap he finds.” Paolo flicked his hand toward James's

headdress. “That's the reason for the headdress. Don't laugh, but it helps us identify him in a crowd of zombies. He likes to go out alone. When we look out the window and see him approaching, we know it's him.

“Don’t you worry that one of the slightly smarter or curious zombies will take his headdress and you'll be fooled?”

Paolo looked annoyed, and maybe a little embarrassed. “Uh. No. Well, maybe. Hopefully the zombie wouldn't know where we live.” *Paolo would have to work on his powers of self-deception*, Jackson thought. Jackson was quite good at that. After all, he'd convinced himself that he was alright living up on the hill with no human interaction for so long.

The four decided to stay at Jackson's cafe that night. He had more food than they did, and he was close to the bus stop. He wasn't even sure where to start. He needed so much, but he wasn't sure what was still available, or where it would be. He needed fuel for his generator, but he didn't know how he would get it. Jayne said they check cars as they go along to find out if they work and have fuel. If they found one, they could use it to get heavy items. If it broke down, though, they'd be stuck walking. Cabs didn't operate this far into the Apocalypse.

The next morning as they walked down the incline toward the zombie depot, they talked about all they'd found out

in the years since the dead failed to die. Jackson had the most questions because he'd been alone for so long.

"How are they still functioning if they don't, uh—man, this is gross…if they don't eat? Don't they need at least some fuel for brain activity?"

Jaynie, holding hands with Paolo, sighed as she mulled her answer. "Yes. I believe they need some sustenance. The reports on the news right after the beginning indicated that they had very rudimentary brain function. The ability to walk, to swallow, to moan—that was all intact. They had very little use for their brain beyond that. We figure they don't need as much energy as a living human would. I don't like to think about this, but they do still eat." She shuddered a little.

Jackson looked like he didn't want to ask this. He looked repulsed. "So...what do they eat if they don't eat us?"

She teared up a little. Paolo grabbed her by the shoulders and hugged her as they walked.

"Poor Tiger. I loved my cat. He was 14 years old and 14 pounds. He didn't stand a chance. I protected him as long as I could. Now the animals have wised up and gone underground, into the forests or up in the trees in the city. All they have left are rats and mice, and they're staying hidden. The zombies find them when they can, but even the rats can outrun them. Luckily turtles have been staying mostly in the water. They're

about the only creatures who couldn't outrun the monsters."

Paolo sensed that Jaynie had said all she could say on the subject, so he continued. "That supply has almost run out. Which is why when you're out there, you'll see zombie remnants on the ground: dried out husks of zombies, dust that used to be zombies. Whatever is still living in the zombies is dying. The ones you see, for the most part, will be largely immobile. They'll look like what they are—walking corpses.

Jackson shuddered. Suddenly he was thinking he'd rather live without a generator.

Day Trip

They made it to the designated stop. Jackson had never been to this spot before; he'd only stared at it every day for years. Wondering how the bus still ran. Wondering how the zombies knew to congregate there, how they remembered or cared where to go. This was a particularly lavish bus stop, which is maybe why the zombies chose it. As far as he'd seen, the zombies didn't stand at any of the other stops, just this one. This one had three covered benches. It had a trash can, though the zombies didn't use it. The dead didn't care about the environment, he figured. Though they'd inherited the earth, so you'd think they'd give the tiniest of craps.

The four stood behind the covered benches. They wanted to be unobtrusive and incognito. Paolo instructed them on proper bus boarding procedures for the living: “1) Be last on the bus. That way if we get attacked, we can quickly disembark. 2) Stand, don't sit, near the door. See number one. The only problem is that the door won’t open as long as the bus is in motion. This is why it’s important to scan for live zombies before the bus moves. See number one. 3) Seriously—do not draw attention to yourselves. They'll engage each other—have mock conversations, almost like they're talking to each other, but they’ll just be grunting. But if one's gaze even so much as flickers in your direction, you can bet it’s a ‘live zombie.’”

This is what Paolo called them. They weren't any more alive than the others, but they still seemed to have a distant memory of eating human flesh, and there would be just a hint of blood lust—just enough to spark an instinct for them to pounce. Even if they didn't bite, it would be enough to freak the person out for a long while.

Paolo was adamant about these rules. James left the headdress at the cafe because that day they wouldn't be separating at all.

“So, how does the bus operate after all these years?” Jackson asked.

Jaynie smiled. “Really? The solar bus? You didn't

read about it or hear all the hoopla when we got it?" Jackson shook his head. "Man, you really did live in a bubble before the Paca." Jackson suddenly felt sad, and ashamed for not hearing about the solar bus…for living in a bubble when there *were* millions of people around him. For living in even more of a bubble once the people had died.

"Yeah, well, I was never much for current events. Or people," Jackson said. When he said that, James lowered his head toward him, almost as if tipping an imaginary hat. Jackson guessed he understood how he felt. "What's the Paca"?

"Eh, that's just my name for the Apocalypse," Jaynie answered. "I got tired of saying the whole word, so I shortened it. The phrase never caught on." Jaynie looked impetuously at James and Paolo. "Breaths are too precious to spend on unnecessary syllables."

The crew watched the dead shuffle toward them. Scrape their feet along the concrete. Jackson noticed that what used to be skin was mostly gone. What was left looked like old, grayed, flaked parchment. Man, it was gross. Like something from a crypt movie: hardly any hair, hardly any clothes left. Jackson was never one to use the phrase "ewwwww" but he was thinking it then. Nevertheless, all four of them scoured the faces and movements of each individual in the crowd, looking for signs of intelligence…looking for signs of acknowledgment. The crowd

seemed alright. They'd just have to scan the ones already on the bus.

They let the non-living board first. Manners always! The four of them entered last, and entered cautiously—Jackson being the very last. As the newbie, he got "first run" privileges in case of emergency: Last on the bus, first to run off screaming.

Jackson noticed that no one put money in the slot, or scanned a card. He hadn't thought about that. He had no money and no card. As he moved down the aisle behind the others, he went unnoticed. No one took the littlest bit of heed. He accidentally knocked the knee of an elderly zombie woman (how could he tell, really?) and he said "excuse me" when part of her knee crumbled. He felt bad. He hoped she could walk off the bus. That would be messed up if he'd disintegrated her leg and she was stuck on the bus. Would she crawl off? Would any of the zombies help her? Would they help her?

He decided that all of those options creeped him out, and that bus riding was a novelty he didn't like. He didn't think he'd be doing it again—like Disney World or sky-diving. It's fun to do once, but he didn't want to do it often. He'd actually done neither of those things, but he didn't think he'd like either. Standing in long lines at amusement parks, propelling oneself thousands of feet through the air toward

earth, riding on a bus with dozens of people who formerly wanted to eat his brains—none of those appealed to him much.

He was amazed at how well the zombies approximated normal bus behavior. They stayed in their seats, grunted at each other amiably, and they didn't fight. When one of them wanted off the bus, they pulled the cord on the wall beside the seats. Jackson noticed that when the stop was signaled, a digital message displayed at the front of the bus. It probably used to read "Stop Requested", but some joking, still mentally functioning zombie must have reprogrammed the sign. Now when the sign was triggered, it showed "Brains Requested" instead. Jackson chuckled to himself. *That would be a good name for a story*, he thought. It seemed almost sad that the dead didn't even know what that meant anymore…bygone era…formerly their raison d'etre, now just an unheeded suggestion.

Jackson thought maybe the zombie dust was getting in his lungs. He began to sneeze. Paolo pushed his hand against Jackson's face and forced him to hold his sneeze. None of the passengers looked up, but right then James looked out the window. He noticed a figure standing at a stop. He alerted the other three and they all froze, Jackson still wheezing and containing a determined sneeze.

The bus slowed. The zombie lumbered toward the bus.

As he laboriously climbed the three steps up, his eyes flickered toward Jaynie, Paolo, James and Jackson.

"Run!!!" Paolo yelled. Jackson, being the closest to the back door, was the one responsible for opening the door. He suddenly remembered when his dad was stationed overseas and he would shuffle between Europe and his mom in the states. He remembered how he hated being on the exit row of the plane: The feeling of responsibility, the pressure. He would be a wreck the entire way. He would flag down an attendant and claim to be under 15 and therefore not of age to shoulder the burden of a panicking mass. He did that until he was 20. He didn't fly much after that anyway. Dad came back to the states, and he didn't see much of him as an adult.

Jackson began to panic. His three new friends began pushing him. The bus would start moving again soon, and they would be stuck with Mr. Flicker. Mr. Flicker was laboriously sprinting toward them. Well, hobbling quickly. Jaynie began shouting at Jackson: "Open the damned door! Move! Move!" She body-slammed Jackson into the door. The door didn't budge. Paolo moved Jackson out of the way, but it was too late. The bus was ambulatory. They were stuck on a rolling, sealed hunk of metal with possible death.

Jaynie and Paolo claimed that James had saved them, but they had a few survival tricks up their sleeves. Well, to

use the technical term, nunchaku. Jayne had some nunchucks up her sleeves. When she broke those things out and started to whip the deadhead with them, Jackson felt something he hadn't felt for a woman in twenty years. He went a little straight for Jaynie in those moments.

The other patrons only seemed marginally put upon by the goings-on. A few zombie knees and elbows were disintegrated by the wake of the nunchucks. Jaynie was flying so fast, he couldn't tell what was moving or where it was. The end result was Jaynie, with the crook of the nunchucks pressed against the zombie's throat. One movement later and she had broken his neck. His head still twitched, but it no longer powered his body. Jackson wondered if his broken body would still be lying against the bus seat tomorrow and for days after.

The bus stopped. Paolo had pulled the Brains Requested cord. Smart. Why they hadn't thought of that before, Jackson couldn't explain. Dumbassery. Dumbassery is a sufficient explanation for most behavior.

Later he would ask Jaynie about her special skill set. "So...how does a small, petite, young woman learn to use nunchucks?"

"How does an old, dried-up misanthrope get to own a restaurant?" He grimaced and she smirked. "While you jackasses were playing Nintendo, I was learning martial arts and watching

online teaching videos. I'm pretty good. State championship when I was in high school. I guess I'm kinda the champion of the world, now, huh?”

"Will you teach me? Would you mind if we looked for some nunchucks for me?"

"Sure. You know people think that a whip is the most dangerous long, non-mechanical weaponized implement, but I think nunchucks have the most power." Jackson's heart would always go a little straight for her when she talked like this, but his long, weaponized implement would always point a little more toward gay.

They took a detour to a sporting goods store. There they picked up starter nunchucks for Jackson (Plastic. Jackson was ashamed), some real nunchucks for when he was trained and some other assorted could-be weaponry. Also some skates. James decided he wanted to skate next time he went out by himself.

Jackson got a few more generators. James said he could make something for him that's much more powerful for much less money. Jackson gently pointed out that they weren't paying for any of this anyway. After a few hours searching, they were able to find fuel and oil for the generators and a car. The four found a pick-up to boost, and it already had more than enough gas to get them back to Utter.

They made it back to Jackson’s neighborhood with

little problem; a few severed dead limbs in the road, mostly turned to dust already. T*hey laid the ground work*, Jackson thought. Yep, he still had it. The power to make excruciatingly bad puns is a great power indeed, much like the mastery of nunchaku.

Their only problem came right as they were turning on to Down at the Bottom of the Road (DABR, though that never caught on). Paolo was driving, so Jaynie hopped out of the car to open the gate. Jackson would later say it was the glint of sun off her red hair and pale skin that caught the attention of another Mr. Flicker. Jaynie would say that the Flickers had a hate radar for Jackson. Regardless, another semi-aware zombie was wandering up the street toward them.

Jackson tortured himself with thoughts of failure, of defeat after such a lucky day. He didn't know what to do. Should they abandon the truck? Each run in a different direction? At least that way three fourths of them would survive. Should they gun it and give the truck all the juice they got? It would be tough. The road was steep. Should they give up? Rot in the truck and hope he went away? Give themselves to fate?

Jackson would find that Paolo usually came up with the best, least fatalistic plans. Jaynie got out of the way and Paolo ran over Mr. Flicker with the truck. *Mr. Flicker was now a dead Mother Flicker.*

--and the car skidded into the brush right as he thought that.

End